The Effects of Marital Conflict on Children's Social competence: The Role of Gender

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Abstract

Children with high social competence develop and maintain strong relationships, experience positive self-concept and self-esteem, and perform better in school. One influence on the development of social competence may be the family environment. From a social learning theory perspective, while engaging in conflict parents model behaviors for children. Constructive martial conflict models effective social skills through behaviors like problem solving and conflict management, whereas destructive martial conflict models poor communication, inadequate emotion regulation, and escalation of conflict. According to the same gender modeling hypothesis, girls may be especially sensitive to their mothers' conflict behaviors, and boys to those of their fathers. This study examined associations between constructive and destructive marital conflict and children's social competence and whether gender moderates these associations. Mothers and fathers of 66 children, aged 7-8 years, visited the lab and participated in a 10-min videotaped conversation in which one of the couple's more significant problems was discussed. These conversations were coded by trained raters for constructive and destructive conflict behaviors. Children's mothers and fathers also completed a survey in which they reported their child's prosocial/communication skills and emotion regulation. Correlation analyses indicated no significant associations between marital conflict behaviors and children's social competence overall. When data were analyzed separately by child gender, some associations for girls approached significance at $p < 0.10$. However, regression analyses with tests of interaction effects indicated no significant differences in relations between marital conflict and social competence for girls versus boys.

The Effects of Marital Conflict on Children's Social competence: The Role of Gender

Social competence has been defined in many ways throughout the literature on children's social and emotional development. Social competence can be broadly defined as "effectiveness in social interaction" (Rose-Krasnor, 1997). Agarwal and Agarwal (2018) describe socially competent children as confident, friendly, communicative, and having good emotional regulation skills. Many researchers define social competence within a specific domain, but in general the overlapping theme throughout the literature is social success. With respect to the scope of this paper, I will be focusing on two aspects of children's social competence—prosocial communication skills and emotional regulation skills—in order to see how children develop the necessary social and emotional skills to be successful functioning members of society. In order to analyze this, I must discuss what socially competent children look like at different ages. The skills and behaviors that are essential to developing healthy social behaviors differ with the age of the child. At the same time, these behaviors can have different implications for social adaptation for children of different ages and social situations.

Social competence begins to develop in early childhood when the child's primary source of social and emotional support is their parents. Children develop social skills by observing their parents which, in turn, will eventually help them adapt socially around their peers. Social skills increase the child's awareness and comprehension of social situations, so that they may effectively use the appropriate social behaviors in any given context. Since very young children are just beginning to develop social relations, preschool aged children are primarily concerned with group acceptance and having other children to play with (Coplan et al., 2004).

The social and emotional skills that are developed in middle childhood are particularly important for the onset and maintenance of social relationships. In middle childhood, children experience an increase in group activities and autonomy. Children's social and emotional development goes through an immense change. The ability to express, regulate, and manage emotions strengthens over the course of childhood and into adolescence. Children begin to use emotional expression as a guide to regulate social relationships. A distinction is then made between true emotional expression while with friends and a display with other people (Carr, 2017). In terms of regulating their emotions, children are increasingly able to efficiently identify and autonomously regulate their own emotions, even self-conscious emotions (e.g., guilt, embarrassment, etc.), rather than relying on caregivers (Carr, 2017). Children are better equipped to manage their emotions due to an increased understanding of social roles, use of social skills in dealing with self- and other- centered emotions, awareness of feeling multiple emotions at once, and being able to apply that knowledge to other social contexts to make and maintain friendships (Carr, 2017). The ability to integrate thoughts and feelings while in different social contexts enables the child to develop more meaningful peer relationships, as well as social behaviors along the way.

Positive outcomes of high social competence include increased self-regulation skills, increasingly positive self-concept and self-esteem, as well as strong academic outcomes (Joy, 2016). Yet, when children have difficulty maintaining social relationships, a failure to develop these necessary skills can lead to social and psychological adversity. Failures in the development of social and emotional competencies during childhood can lead to difficulty within many social contexts, along with altered stress responses, which then can increase the risk for developing

mental and physical health problems over time (Luecken et al., 2013). Ruegg (2003) explains that without adequate social competence, people can face many difficulties with employment, daily living skills, independent living, and participating in society.

Many factors can influence social competence in children. Bandura (1971) stated that parental expectations and child-rearing practices, combined with the surrounding social environment, provide important grounds for social development. Thus, parenting, peer groups, teachers, and the school environment all influence the development of social competence. However, for this study, I focused on the important influences the family environment has on children, specifically marital conflict. Constructive martial conflict can demonstrate social skills that may help children improve their social understanding and competence. However, destructive martial conflict can have long-lasting negative effects on children's emotion regulation and social skills (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2017).

Literature Review

Theoretical Perspectives

One important context for the development of children's social competence is the family. The family environment can give children a basis for how to interact socially at an early age. By observing and participating in family interactions, children can be an active member in their own social development. Children's early experiences with social interactions in the family, especially marital conflict, are likely to have a formative impact on their developing peer relationships, as well as their social competency. Marital conflict, or conflict between parents or parental figures

who reside with the child and share a romantic relationship, for example, can have tremendous impacts on children's social abilities. There are several theories that explain why marital conflict may affect the development of children's social competence. First, according to social learning theory, the conflict itself can serve as a model for children on how to resolve conflict and engage in problem solving techniques (Bandura, 1971). Younger children are more at risk for developing dysfunctional social skills, as they have not developed the necessary cognitive capacities involved with social problem solving, therefore they may then imitate the maladaptive conflict styes and strategies modeled by others in their social domain (Finger et al., 2010).

Another perspective on the effects of marital conflict on child development is emotional security theory (EST). EST originally stemmed from attachment theory, demonstrating that as children are exposed to destructive inter-parental conflict it affects their sense of security within their family and in their relationships with parents (Davies & Cummings, 1994). EST researchers examine the specific behaviors that children may exhibit when they are insecure within the inter-parental relationship. These behaviors include aggression, avoidance, mediation, and pacifism (Davies & Woitach, 2008). These reactions and behaviors can have a detrimental effect on the development of children's social competence due to a heightened perceptual sensitivity to identifying threatening stimuli accompanying inter-parental conflict. If children are insecure within their familial relationships it affects their relationships with others. By forming maladaptive coping strategies to deal with the strife endured in the family system, these behaviors can be extended into other social realms, especially in the context of peer relationships.

Marital Conflict and Children's Social Competence

Although a significant amount of prior research has considered how marital conflict affects children, relatively little of this research has focused on children's social competence as an outcome. Moreover, research has not consistently distinguished types of marital conflict. In line with EST, distinguishing between conflict types is crucial when determining the effect interparental conflict can have on children. A significant threat to a child's emotional security is being exposed to destructive marital conflict, which most prior research has focused on. It is important to distinguish constructive from destructive conflict, as it is not necessarily the presence vs. absence of conflict that matters but rather the nature of the conflict itself. Furthermore, this distinction is also critical from a social learning perspective, since children will directly model the behaviors they see their parents engaging in. Some examples of destructive conflict include verbal conflict and physical aggression. Yet, nonverbal hostility, stonewalling, and other types of nonverbal and nonphysical conflict can also be characterized as destructive (Bergman et al., 2016).

Conversely, constructive conflict can be particularly positive for children. Bergman et al. (2016) outline specific constructive conflict behaviors that children feel good about adults engaging in, such as using apologies, problem-solving techniques, compromising, supporting the other partner, expressing affection, and using humor. However, some behaviors like using sarcasm as humor and insincere apologies can be less effective, as these behaviors derail communication and impede conflict resolution (Goeke-Morey et al., 2003). Behaviors like problem-solving and compromise techniques have been distinguished as beneficial to handling

conflict, which can have a lasting positive impact on the marital, parent–child, and family contexts. From a social learning theory perspective (Bandura, 1971), constructive conflict behaviors model positive social skills and effective emotion regulation for children, and thus may help them develop their social competence.

Of the literature linking marital conflict and children's social competence, most has focused exclusively on destructive conflict. As early as infancy, there is evidence that destructive marital conflict can shape children's emotion regulation, an important component of social competence. Frankel et al. (2015) looked at the effects of marital conflict on infants' distressed responses to negative emotions longitudinally from 8 months old to 24 months old. Higher destructive marital conflict at 8 months old predicted negative and withdrawn child affect at 24 months old. Negative affect was independently predicted by marital conflict, mothers' distressed responses to infants' negative emotions, and by fathers' distressed responses only when marital conflict was high. Researchers determined this association is due to social referencing, where the parents respond with distress, and this influences the child's negative affect, because this signals to the child that their upset reactions are justified and there is good reason to be upset, thus reinforcing the child's negative affect.

Destructive marital conflict has also been linked to children's social competence during the preschool years. Spjeldnes et al. (2010) measured direct effects of interparental conflict on social skill development of preschool aged children. They also looked at whether a close teacher relationship would act as a buffer of this association. They observed a negative correlation between destructive marital conflict and children's social skills. However, the role of the teacher-

child relationship as a buffer was not supported. In a study that considered constructive in addition to destructive marital conflict, Hosokawa and Katsura (2017) examined the effects of marital conflict on the development of social skills in children aged 5–6. The social skills examined included self-control, cooperation with peers, and assertion. Researchers determined that destructive marital conflict impacted negative parenting practices, which in turn affected child social skills. In other words, negative parenting practices mediated the relationship between destructive marital conflict and lower child cooperation, self-control, and assertion. However, constructive marital conflict was associated with greater positive parenting practices, leading to increased child cooperation and assertion abilities. Put another way, positive parenting practices mediated the relationship between constructive marital conflict and increased child self-control and assertion abilities. Therefore, there was evidence for both direct and indirect effects of marital conflict on the development of social skills during the preschool years.

The effects of interparental conflict during children's preschool years on children's social competence can be long term. Davies et al. (2018) researched the process by which emotional insecurities mediate the relationship between destructive interparental conflict and social difficulties. They determined that increased experience of destructive interparental conflict in early childhood predicted children's emotional insecurity in adolescence. In adolescence, greater emotional insecurity presented a decrease in friendship affiliation, which in turn negatively affected social competence. Friendship affiliation was defined by Davies et al. (2018) as friends that can rely on each other through validation and reciprocity, by exhibiting warmth and affection, participating in shared activities, and cooperating with one another.

In studies of adolescents, children's perceptions of marital conflict have emerged as a significant factor in adolescents' developing social competency skills. Azam and Hanif (2011) investigated the relationship between adolescent children's perceptions of parents' destructive marital conflict and their perceived parental attachment and social competency. They found a negative correlation between perceived marital conflict and both perceived parental attachment and social competency. Therefore, the degree to which the adolescent child perceives their parents' destructive marital conflict as severe may have a significant impact on their success within social relationships.

Does Child Gender Matter?

There is reason to believe that girls' and boys' social competence may be affected differently by marital conflict. A number of studies have suggested that girls' and boys' reactions to marital conflict are different, as well as resulting behavioral outcomes, but the nature and directions of these gender differences are quite mixed. Although parents may not directly socialize social competence differently for boys and girls, some research suggests that the effects of family socialization are more pronounced for boys than for girls (Spruijt et al., 2019). Spruijt et al. (2019) reported that boys who were asked fewer questions by their parents showed lower social cognitive ability, while girls generally demonstrated exceptional levels of social skills regardless. However, Hakvoort et al. (2010) noted that the relationship between the family environment and children's adjustment is simply different for boys and girls. Whereas boys tend to exhibit more externalizing behaviors in response to marital conflict, girls tend to exhibit more internalizing behaviors.

Others have suggested that marital conflict is associated with the social competence of boys and girls via different processes or mechanisms. Vandewater and Lansford (1998) concluded in a sample of children aged 10-17, that for girls, the relationship between marital conflict and childhood well-being was mediated by the degree to which the parent showed warmth towards the child (i.e., the quality of the parent-child relationship). However, for boys, there was a direct effect, in which both marital conflict and parental warmth were independently related to boys' childhood well-being. In contrast, though, in a study that focused on mothers and sons, Lindsey et al. (2002) found that marital conflict interferes with the emotional bond and processes developed in the mother-son relationship, which then manifests in boys' problematic emotional expressiveness in peer relationships.

A few studies have also considered relations between interparental conflict and children's social competence during middle childhood and whether these relations differ by child gender. In a surprising result, Isabella and Diener (2010) found that for boys, greater frequency and intensity of perceived marital conflict was associated with their more positive self-representations of social competence, whereas the same association was not found for girls. It is possible that parent gender is an important piece of the puzzle, too. In a longitudinal study of 9-year-olds, Underwood et al. (2008) discussed the relationship between negative interparental conflict strategies and social and physical aggression in children's peer relationships. Questionnaires on conflict strategies were given to parents when children were age 9 and teachers rated children's social and physical aggression at 9 and 10 years old. They found that for girls, only mother's negative interparental conflict strategies were associated with girls' greater social and physical aggression in peer relationships. For boys, there was no relationship between

negative interparental conflict strategies and social and physical aggression in peer relationships. Researchers explained these results using the "same-gender modeling hypothesis," which posits that girls' social behaviors are more closely related to their mothers' conflict behavior, whereas boys' social behaviors are more closely related to their fathers' behavior during marital conflict.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

Although there are several theoretical perspectives on why marital conflict affects children's social competence, the present study was guided by social learning theory (Bandura, 1971). Understanding how martial conflict may model social behaviors for children has significant implications for knowledge regarding family influences on the development of social competence and prevention and intervention efforts with families.

In this study, I used observational and survey data from a sample of families with school-age children to examine relations between constructive as well as destructive marital conflict and two aspects of children's social competence—prosocial communication skills and emotion regulation. I had two specific research questions: (1) Are destructive and constructive marital conflict behaviors associated with children's social competence? and (2) Do the associations between marital conflict and children's social competence differ for boys versus girls? For question 1, I expected that the nature of the conflict behavior would be what matters most to the development of children's social behaviors. I hypothesized that when couples displayed constructive conflict behaviors, such as high positive communication, strong problem-solving, and high cohesiveness, children would be rated by parents as more socially competent. In contrast, when couples displayed destructive conflict behaviors such as high negative

communication and high negative escalation, I expected that parents would rate children as lower in social competence. With respect to question 2, I hypothesized that child gender would moderate the associations between marital conflict and child social competence, consistent with the same-gender modeling hypothesis. Thus, I expected girls' social competence to be more closely related to their mothers' conflict behaviors, and boys' social competence to be more closely related to their fathers' conflict behaviors.

Method

Participants & Procedure

Initially, a longitudinal study of couples called the New Parents Project was conducted across their transition to parenthood between the years of 2008-2010. The original sample recruited included 182 different-sex couples who were expecting their first biological child. Couples were residing in a large Midwestern city and surrounding area in the United States and were recruited by means of announcements at childbirth education classes, newspaper advertisements, and flyers at local businesses and doctors' offices. A series of follow-up assessments on the children of these couples was also conducted. The current study uses observational and survey data from the Phase 6 follow-up to the New Parents Project conducted when the families' first-born children were approximately 7.5 years old.

To be eligible for participation, couples had to be expecting their first biological child, English speakers, at least 18 years old, and either married or cohabitating. In addition to this, participants also had to be employed full-time with both parents expecting to return to work once their child was born. Out of the 182 couples recruited for the original study, 86% of the couples

were married. The expectant parents' median education level was a bachelor's degree and the median annual family income was US $79,500. On average, mothers were aged 28.24 years old (SD = 4.02, range: 18 – 42), and fathers were 30.20 years old (SD = 4.81, range: 18–50). A majority of the participants were White (85% of mothers and 86% of fathers). An additional 6% of mothers and 7% of fathers identified as Black. Self-identified Asian mothers accounted for 3% and fathers accounted for 3% as well. Four percent of mothers and 2% of fathers self-identified as Hispanic. Two percent of mothers and 4% of fathers identified as other races, while 4% of mothers and 1% of fathers identified as two or more races. Of the children in the sample, 49% were female.

At the Phase 6 follow-up that was conducted when the couples' first-born child was approximately 7.5 years old, 66 children and families participated (n = 39 families of boys; n = 27 families of girls). Besides child gender, which skewed male compared to the even distribution in the original sample, the demographic characteristics of the subsample of children and families that participated in the Phase 6 follow-up were similar to those of the original sample. The median level of parent education was a bachelor's degree. Median family income at recruitment was US $80,000, and had increased to $116,000 by Phase 6. 86% of parents identified as White. Parents included in the follow-up subsample were similar in age to those in the overall sample at recruitment: M = 28.65 years for mothers (SD = 3.71) and M = 30.43 (SD = 4.17) years for fathers.

The original study was conducted in four phases: third trimester of pregnancy, 3, 6, and 9 months postpartum. Several longitudinal follow-up assessments were also conducted. The focus

of the current study was on observational and survey data that were collected at the Phase 6 follow-up conducted when the families' first-born children were 7.5 years old. At Phase 6, parents visited the laboratory together with their child for approximately 2.5 hours. While children completed assessments, parents were interviewed individually and allowed time to finish questionnaires. Parents also completed an observational assessment of couple interaction, described below.

Measures

Child social Competence. Children's social competence was assessed using the Social Competence Scale-Parent Version (see Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 1999; Kendall & Wilcox, 1979). Children's prosocial communication skills and emotion regulation were measured through this 12-item scale administered to parents. The items on the questionnaire reflected behaviors a child might exhibit in a social context, such as "Your child can give suggestions and opinions without being bossy," (prosocial communication) or "Your child can calm down when excited or all wound up." (emotion regulation) Parents were then asked to assess how well each item described their child on a five-point Likert scale ranging from zero (Not at all) to 4 (Very Well). The two subscales (Prosocial/Communication Skills and Emotional Regulation Skills) each yielded an individual score that was computed by averaging the 6 items associated with each subscale. Cronbach's alphas indicated acceptable reliability for mothers' reports ($\alpha = .83$ for prosocial communication and $\alpha = .79$ for emotion regulation) and fathers' reports ($\alpha = .84$ for prosocial communication and $\alpha = .84$ for emotion regulation). Given that mothers' and fathers' reports on prosocial communication skills ($r = .55$, $p < .001$) and on

emotion regulation ($r = .64$, $p < .001$) were significantly and strongly correlated, we averaged mothers' and fathers' reports to produce a single score reflecting the child's prosocial communication skills and a single score reflecting the child's social competence.

Couple Assessment and Coding. Each parent was asked to complete a brief survey regarding the severity of different relationship problems and assign each problem a score ranging from 0–100. After completing the surveys, participants completed an observational assessment of couple behavior together called the Marital Agendas Protocol (Notarius & Vanzetti, 1983). Couples were asked to share their survey responses and choose one of their more significant problems to discuss for 10 minutes with the goal of reaching a solution both parties could agree on. The discussions were video recorded and coded for couple behavior.

A team of trained research assistants rated these interactions using a modified version of the System for Coding Interactions in Dyads (SCID; Malik & Lindahl, 2004)—the System for Coding Interactions among New Parents (SCINP; Hunt, Kamp Dush, & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010). The scales used in the present study were those that best represented the extent to which couples engaged in constructive conflict (mother and father positive communication, mother and father problem-solving, couple cohesiveness) and destructive conflict (mother and father negative communication, couple negative escalation). Each behavior was rated on a scale from 1 (*very low*) to 5 (*high*). Positive communication reflects the extent to which each partner is receptive and acknowledges the other partner's emotions and needs. Problem-solving involves both partners expressing their feelings and thoughts, while being respectful, non-threatening, and nonjudgmental. Cohesiveness represents the degree to which the overall couple interaction is

characterized by how comfortable the intimate connection as well as how well they work together as a team. Negative communication illustrates behaviors along the lines of sarcasm, hostility, or malicious intent. Negative escalation would express how often partners respond to negative comments or behaviors with more negative comments or behaviors. Both individual coders rated each episode and intraclass correlation coefficients ranged from .79 to .89, reflecting good reliability.

Data Analysis Plan

I used IBM SPSS 25.0 for data analysis. In preliminary analyses, I first computed descriptive statistics on the variables of interest. To test the associations between marital conflict and children's social competence and evaluate my first hypothesis, I used correlation analysis. I also computed correlations separately by child gender as a preliminary test of my second hypothesis. As a more stringent test of whether associations between marital conflict and child social competence differed by child gender, I used linear regression analysis including tests of interactions between aspects of constructive and destructive marital conflict and child gender.

Results

Descriptive Analyses

Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1. Overall, parents in this sample rated children as relatively high in social competence (prosocial communication and emotion regulation). When observed interacting together as couples, parents showed moderate levels of positive communication and problem-solving, moderate to high levels of cohesiveness, low

levels of negative communication, and low negative escalation. These characteristics and behaviors are consistent with the low-risk, community nature of the sample.

Correlation Analyses

Overall correlations ($N = 66$; see Table 2), did not indicate any statistically significant ($p < .05$) associations between aspects of constructive and destructive marital conflict and children's prosocial communication or emotion regulation. None of the correlations approached significance ($p < .10$) either. These results were not consistent with Hypothesis 1.

As a preliminary test of the same-gender modeling hypothesis (Hypothesis 2), correlations between marital conflict and children's social competence were computed separately for the subsamples of boys (n = 39) and girls (n = 27; Table 3). None of these associations were statistically significant ($p < .05$) or marginal ($p < .10$) for boys. However, for girls, three of the correlations approached significance at $p < .10$. When mothers showed stronger problem-solving during marital conflict, daughters tended to have better prosocial/communication skills. When fathers demonstrated better problem-solving during marital conflict, daughters tended to have stronger emotion regulation abilities. In contrast, when mothers exhibited greater negative communication during marital conflict, daughters had a tendency to show poorer emotion regulation abilities. These preliminary analyses suggested an effect of child gender on relations between marital conflict and children's social competence, although the pattern was not consistent with Hypothesis 2 (the same-gender modeling hypothesis). Instead, these results suggested that girls may be more susceptible to mothers' and fathers' marital conflict than boys.

Regression Analyses

Formal tests of interaction effects between child gender and aspects of constructive and destructive conflict in relation to children's prosocial communication skills and emotion regulation abilities were conducted using a series of linear regressions in which the following predictors were entered: one aspect of marital conflict, child gender, and the marital conflict X child gender interaction term. Thus, because I assessed eight aspects of marital conflict, eight regressions were run to predict children's prosocial communication skills, and eight more to predict children's emotion regulation. These regression analyses showed no statistically significant interaction effects. Thus, rigorous tests of differences between boys and girls in the relations between marital conflict and social competence did not provide evidence for child gender differences in relations between marital conflict and child social competence.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand the ways in which marital conflict plays a role in children's social competence and the potential role of gender in these associations. Middle childhood is a critical stage in the life-span development of social and emotional skills. This is a time where children are more involved in group activities and have an increased sense of autonomy in their social interactions with peers. Therefore, it is important to clarify the role the family environment plays in reinforcing these social and emotional skills that are especially important for the onset and maintenance of social relationships throughout the lifespan. Unfortunately, the current study did not provide evidence that parents' behaviors during marital conflict are related to children's social competence, and yielded only very weak evidence that child gender may play a role in relations between marital conflict and child social competence.

Possible reasons for my largely non-significant results and directions for future research are discussed below.

Following Bandura (1971), the family environment can provide children with a model for how to interact socially. Therefore, marital conflict can have a significant formative impact on children's developing social and emotional skills, as well as their peer relationships. Whereas constructive martial conflict models effective social skills through behaviors like problem solving and conflict management, destructive martial conflict can model poor communication, inadequate emotion regulation, and escalation of conflict (Hosokawa & Katsura, 2017). Therefore. it is important to distinguish between types of conflict, because it is the nature of the conflict that ought to matter most for the development of children's social and emotional skills, not just the presence or absence of conflict. Thus, I hypothesized that couples' displays of constructive conflict behaviors would be associated with better child social competence, whereas couples' displays of destructive conflict behaviors would be associated with lower child social competence. However, I found no significant associations overall between aspects of constructive and destructive marital conflict and parents' reports of children's prosocial communication or emotion regulation. Thus, my results were not consistent with Hypothesis 1.

In light of prior research that suggests that parents' marital conflict might affect girls and boys differently (Hakvoort, et al., 2010; Lindsey et al., 2002; Isabella & Diener, 2010; Spruijt et al., 2019; Underwood et al., 2008; Vandewater & Lansford, 1998), I also anticipated that the associations of destructive and constructive marital conflict behaviors with children's social competence would differ based on child gender. In other words, I expected that gender would

moderate the relationship between marital conflict and child social competence. This expectation was guided by the same gender-modeling hypothesis, which posits that girls are especially sensitive to their mothers' conflict behaviors, and boys to those of their fathers (Underwood et al., 2008). In preliminary correlation analyses conducted separately for the subsamples of girls and boys, there was only weak evidence of differences in patterns of associations between marital conflict and child social competence for girls versus boys. None of the associations even approached significance for boys. Yet, for girls, a few associations approached traditional levels of statistical significance. When mothers showed stronger problem-solving skills, daughters tended to have better prosocial/communication skills. When fathers demonstrated better problem-solving skills, daughters tended to have stronger emotion regulation abilities. In contrast, when mothers exhibited greater negative communication, daughters had a tendency to show poorer emotion regulation abilities.

These tentative results suggest that there seems to be an effect of child gender on relations between marital conflict and children's social competence; however, this pattern suggests that it is not same-gender modeling that underlies these associations. Rather, girls' social competence appears more susceptible to their parents' conflict behaviors as compared to boys. These findings contrast with those of Spruijt et al. (2019), who reported that boys were more susceptible to family environment than girls. However, it could be, as highlighted by Hakvoort et al. (2010), that the relationship between response to marital conflict and children's adjustment is simply different for boys and girls. It is important to point out, though, that the existence of these possible gender differences awaits confirmation in future research, because

more rigorous tests of moderation using regression analysis did not yield evidence of differences in associations between marital conflict and child social competence for boys versus girls.

A number of limitations of this study impacted its results. Given data collection limitations during the Covid-19 pandemic, I used existing data from an ongoing longitudinal study. Thus, I was limited to using available coded data and survey measures. Due to attrition in the larger longitudinal study, my sample was modest in size and thus my analyses had limited statistical power. This was also a community, volunteer sample of primarily white, higher-SES families; therefore, generalizability to diverse families cannot be assumed. The sample also did not have clinical levels of destructive marital conflict nor did the children have behavior problems, which limited variability and may have further hindered my ability to detect significant associations. This was a cross-sectional analysis as well, therefore there is no support for the theorized temporal order between marital conflict and child social competence.

In addition, I did not consider other pathways through which marital conflict may affect children. Given that I had observational data on marital conflict and was interested in the role of gender and effects on social competence, approaching this study from a modeling perspective (Bandura, 1971) made the most sense. However, other theoretical perspectives like emotional security theory, may shed more light on the potential processes through which marital conflict may affect children's social-emotional development (Davies & Cummings, 1994). For instance, marital conflict may affect the quality of the parent-child attachment relationship and children's emotional security, which then may affect the development of children's social competence. Finally, we only had parents report on the child's social competence, and since children are

typically at school with their peers and teachers all day, it would be fruitful in the future to assess these individuals' perceptions of the child's social competence as well, or even conduct direct observations of children while interacting with peers or friends.

Even though there were constraints on this study, there were still many strengths to the approach I took. I included observed data on marital conflict collected in a laboratory setting, whereas the previous literature has most typically used frequency measures of marital conflict based on survey data. I also included constructive marital conflict, because of its potential to support social competence in children, whereas most of the previous literature has focused on the possible negative effects of destructive conflict only. Thus, my study made some advances upon prior work and suggests many important directions for future research on the role of the family environment in the development of children's social competence.

Regarding future research, it will continue to be important to distinguish between types and styles of conflict when researching relations between marital conflict and children's social-emotional development, and would be best to include multiple types of measures of all constructs of interest—i.e., surveys and observations. In the future, research should also look at different populations of children and families of other races, ethnicities, and age groups to see if effects of marital conflict on children's social competence are more pronounced or diminished in particular populations. It would also be interesting to investigate the role of parent-child dyadic relationships in the processes linking marital conflict and children's social competence and employ a longitudinal design to examine relations over time. Family dynamics can have a significant impact on social and emotional abilities for children, and a better understanding of the

role of the family environment will help parents and practitioners who work with families to better support children's positive social-emotional development.

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Tables

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics

	M	*SD*	Min	Max	Skewness	Kurtosis
Child Social Competence						
Prosocial communication	3.80	.55	2.17	4.75	-.77	.50
Emotion regulation	3.2	.57	1.92	4.42	.07	-.52
Constructive Marital Conflict						
Mother's Positive Communication	3.19	.92	1.00	5.00	-.17	.03
Father's Positive Communication	3.00	.83	1.00	5.00	-.44	.38
Mother's Problem Solving	3.16	.83	1.00	5.00	-.33	-.25
Father's Problem Solving	2.93	.80	1.00	4.33	-.29	-.02
Couple Cohesiveness	3.42	1.04	1.00	5.00	1.08	-.27
Destructive Conflict						
Mother's Negative Communication	2.05	1.08	1.00	5.00	1.08	.83
Father's Negative Communication	2.09	1.12	1.00	5.00	1.00	.38
Couple Negative Escalation	1.41	.93	1.00	5.00	2.45	5.16

Table 2

Overall Correlations

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Child Prosocial/ Communication	--	.70**	-.04	-.08	.07	.04	-.01	-.13	.08	.07
2. Child Emotion Regulation		--	.01	.03	.03	.08	-.04	-.13	.01	-.02
3. Mother Positive Communication			--	.52**	.66**	.32**	.75**	-.70**	-.30*	-.35**
4. Father Positive Communication				--	.24	.66**	.75**	-.35**	-.75**	-.52**
5. Mother Problem Solving					--	.44**	.45**	-.58**	-.61	-.19
6. Father Problem Solving						--	.52**	-.28*	-.51**	-.36**
7. Cohesiveness							--	-.64**	-.62**	-.43**
8. Mother Negative Communication								--	.35**	.50**
9. Father Negative Communication									--	.65**
10. Negative Escalation										--

$^{+}p < .10$ $*p < .05$ $**p < .01$

Table 3

Correlations Between Marital Conflict and Child Social Competence by Child Gender

	Boys ($n = 39$)		Girls ($n = 27$)	
	Prosocial Communication	Emotion Regulation	Prosocial Communication	Emotion Regulation
Mother Positive Communication	.00	-.09	.15	.25
Father Positive Communication	-.15	-.05	.04	.21
Mother Problem Solving	-.10	-.10	.35	.32
Father Problem Solving	-.13	-.03	.30	.34
Cohesiveness	-.08	-.18	.07	.21
Mother Negative Communication	.00	-.03	-.31	-.37
Father Negative Communication	.21	.16	-.10	-.24
Negative Escalation	.22	.09	-.09	-.17

$^{+}p < .10$